Tolerance In Israeli Society 1996 - 1997

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One of the characteristics of the commitment citizens have to a democratic regime is a willingness to grant democratic rights to groups or individuals who do not conform to the accepted values and beliefs of that society. This willingness is expressed politically by allowing ideas and interests which are contrary to those of the majority to be aired freely. A tolerant regime, like a tolerant person, is one that allows a wide range of opinions which challenge it.

Many factors influence the degree of tolerance or intolerance, some are on the individual level and others are on the level of the political system. An important factor that determines the degree of tolerance is the commitment to democratic values and standards. Another important factor is the extent to which there is a threat - real or imagined - to the values and political and economic welfare of the people. When faced with serious threats, people tend to express intolerance towards the origins of this threat. Therefore, the social and political context is important as a framework that explains the degree of tolerance and intolerance in a society. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that even if the sources of tolerance or intolerance can be identified and even if the particular situation that caused the expression of intolerant attitudes can be explained, we are still dealing with the phenomenon of intolerance.

The B.I and Lucille Cohen Institute for Public Opinion Research has embarked on a long term project in which it will study attitudes of tolerance and intolerance in Israeli society through periodical population surveys. The present report is the first publication of Israeli Public Opinion. It is based on data collected in three telephone surveys. The first was conducted in February 1996 on a representative sample of the Jewish population and included 505 respondents. The second in November 1996 on 607 respondents. The third in December 1997 included 511 respondents. All telephone interviews were conducted by Modi'in Ezrachi.

Tolerance towards disliked political groups

The willingness of a society to implement democratic values and the principle of freedom of expression can be measured by various indices. We shall study the level of tolerance in Israeli society both by referring to attitudes towards political groups which the respondents described as strongly disliked, and in a more focused way, by examining the attitudes towards groups with extreme ideologies. We shall begin with the data from the three surveys concerning the political groups described by the respondents as most disliked. These groups were classified under two categories - Right and Left

Table 1.
Distribution of Frequencies of Political Groups Described as Disliked, February, November 1996, December 1997 (percentage)
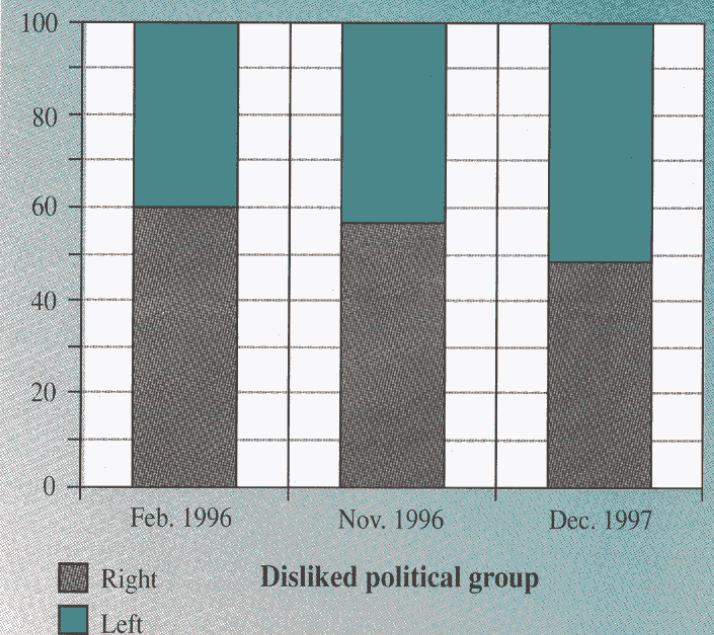
A comparison between the three points in time shows that the percentage of respondents describing Right-wing groups as disliked has decreased while the percentage of respondents describing Left-wing groups as disliked has increased. This tendency can be observed between February and November 1996 but the significant change can be seen between November 1996 and December 1997. While in February 1996 there was a 20% difference between the rate of respondents describing Right or Left groups as disliked, in December 1997 this difference completely disappears. In fact, in December 1997 the percentage of the population who described Left groups as disliked political groups was higher than the percentage of those who described Right groups as disliked political groups, although the difference is minimal.

Identifying disliked political groups served to focus the respondents attention to specific groups when asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with each one of the following six activities that might be taken by - or against - the members of the disliked group.

- ■ *Allow to be interviewed and express opinions in the media.*
- ■ *Allow to hold demonstrations.*
- ■ *Telephone tapping.*
- ■ *Forbid to vote for the Knesset.*
- ■ *Forbid to be elected to the Knesset.*
- ■ *Forbid to be a minister in the government (or Prime Minister).*

Answers **disagreeing** with the first two actions and **agreeing** with the last four, reflect intolerance to disliked groups; answers **agreeing** with first two actions and **disagreeing** with the last four reflect tolerance towards these groups. Scores on each item ranged from 1 - high intolerance, to 5 - high tolerance. From these attitudes we can learn about the level of tolerance of the respondents since they express the willingness of individuals to implement the principle of freedom of speech for political groups which they oppose and with whose opinions they disagree.

The tolerance index was computed as the average of the answers the respondents gave to these six questions. The scores were standardized to a scale of 0 - 100. The score "0" expresses intolerance and "100" high tolerance. The data for the tolerance index will be given only for the December 1997 survey, as the wording of the items in this survey is different from that of February and November 1996. The average tolerance score for December 1997 on this scale is 53 with a standard deviation (SD) of 19.7. Taking into account that the scale ranges from 0 to 100, the level of tolerance in Israeli society is intermediate. The SD reflects the variation among the respondents in their tolerance of disliked political groups. This index can be used in a comparative study of the tolerance of different groups in the population. In the following paragraph we will examine differences in the level of tolerance according to the degree of religiousness and to their political leaning.

Table 2.
Average and SD of Index of Tolerance Towards Disliked Group According to Degree of Religiousness, December 1997.

	Degree Of Religiousness			
	Ultra Orthodox	Orthodox	Observant	Secular
Average	50.4	56.4	52.4	53.3
SD	18.6	16.4	19.2	20.7
	(n=24)	(n=41)	(n=176)	(n=235)

Table 2 presents the mean tolerance scores for population groups according to degree of religiousness. The outstanding result in Table 2 is that on average, the level of tolerance is similar among respondents with different degrees of religiousness. The averages range from about 50 for those who define themselves as ultra orthodox to about 56 for those defining themselves as orthodox.

As with religiousness, there is no significant difference between people with different political leanings in the level of tolerance towards disliked political groups (Table 3). The highest average tolerance score is found among those who define themselves as "Center" (55.6). "Left" and "Right" have the same average tolerance score. The level of tolerance towards disliked political groups tends to be similar and reflects an intermediate degree of tolerance.

Table 3.
Average and SD of Index of Tolerance Towards Disliked Group According to Political Leaning, December 1997.

	Political Leaning		
	Right	Center	Left
Average	52.5	55.6	51.1
SD	18.5	19.9	21.0
	(n=161)	(n=164)	(n=167)

The Perception of Threat

The perception of living under threat is a central factor in the creation of intolerance. This perception may have a number of sources. We tried to define the sources of this feeling by asking the respondents several questions relating to the political group they most disliked.

1. *To what degree does this group endanger the security of the state?*
2. *To what degree does this group pose a danger to democracy in Israel?*
3. *To what degree does this group endanger the Jewish character of Israel as a Jewish state?*

The answers to these questions were *1. Doesn't endanger at all. 2. Doesn't endanger. 3. Not sure. 4. Endangers. 5. Endangers very much.*

We used the answers to construct a variable reflecting a general perception of living under threat. Respondents received a score of 5 on the new variable if their answer to one of the questions at least was "endangers very much". Respondents got a score of 1 - "doesn't endanger at all" - if that was the maximum value they gave on all three questions.

The relationship between tolerance and a perception of living under threat is negative and statistically significant. The averages of the tolerance index ranged from about 70 (on a scale of 0 - 100) for those with the lowest perception of threat (1) to about 47 for those with highest feeling of living under threat (5). Most of the differences between the averages of the tolerance index in the different categories of living under threat are statistically significant. In other words, people who feel that the disliked group is a greater threat to Israeli society tend to be less tolerant towards that group.

To see if the different sources causing the feeling of living under threat can serve as a basis for an explanation of indicating a political group as disliked, we examined the relationship between the political groups chosen as disliked and the three questions referring to the sources of the perception of living under threat. This was done for the data collected in November 1996 and December 1997.

From Table 4 we can see that respondents perceive the groups they most dislike as endangering the security of the state. In this respect, there is no difference between disliked groups from the Left or the Right. In November 1996 about 73% of those who indicated one of the Right-wing groups as disliked said they thought that group endangers the security of the state. A similar percentage (76%) of those indicating one of the Left-wing groups as disliked described it as endangering the security of the state. That trend does not change in December 1997, although there is a decline in the percentage of respondents who think the group they dislike endangers the security of the state. About 66% of those indicating a Right-wing group as disliked and 67.1% of those who indicated a Left-wing group said that that group endangered the security of the state. **We would like to emphasize these findings. About two thirds of the respondents said the**

political group they most disliked endangers the security of the state. This demonstrates that most of the people consider the groups they dislike to be a threat to the internal strength and stability of the country, regardless whether these groups are Right-wing or Left-wing groups. Nevertheless, it can be said with some caution, that all those groups are considered less threatening to the security of the state in December 1997 compared to November 1996.

The data in Table 5 show a clear difference in the perception of groups from the Right or the Left as endangering democracy in Israel. In November 1996, 74% of those indicating right-wing group as disliked claimed that that group endangered democracy in Israel. The proportion is much lower (52%) among those who indicated a Left-wing group. In December 1997 the percentages changed slightly but the difference between the perception of groups from the Right or the Left as endangering democracy in Israel did not change. About 71% of those indicating a Right-wing group as disliked compared with 48.5% of those indicating a Left-wing group as disliked, considered that group as a danger to democracy. On this issue we can see a clear difference in the way the Right and the Left are perceived in Israel. This difference is maintained over time.

Table 6 shows the joint distribution between a disliked political group and the perception that this group endangers the Jewish character of the State of Israel. From the Table we can see that one of the reasons Left-wing groups are disliked is the feeling that these groups endanger the Jewish character of Israel. About 81% of those indicating a Left-wing group as disliked in November 1996 and about 68% indicating a Left-wing group as disliked in December 1997 said they thought that this group endangers the Jewish character of Israel. That as opposed to a little more than 40% of those indicating a Right-wing group as disliked in November 1996 and December 1997. These findings

Table 5.
Joint Distribution Between Disliked Political Group and the Perception that this group endangers Israeli Democracy, November 1996, December 1997 (percentage).

Disliked Political Group	Does Not Endanger		Not Sure		Endangers		Total	
	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997
Right	17.1	20.5	8.9	8.6	74.0	70.9	100.0 (n=292)	100.0 (n=220)
Left	28.9	33.3	18.6	18.2	52.5	48.5	100.0 (n=227)	100.0 (n=213)

Note : The relation between political leaning and perception of threat to democracy is statistically significant at both points of time.

show that although Left-wing groups are still considered as endangering the Jewish character of Israel, fewer people seem to believe so in December 1997 as compared with November 1996.

Table 6.
Joint Distribution Between Disliked Political Group and the Perception that this Group Endangers the Jewish Character of Israel as A Jewish State. November 1996, December 1997 (percentage).

Disliked Political Group	Does Not Endanger		Not Sure		Endangers		Total	
	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997
Right	40.8	41.6	14.8	16.4	44.3	42.0	100.0 (n=292)	100.0 (n=220)
Left	11.5	20.3	7.8	11.6	80.8	68.1	100.0 (n=227)	100.0 (n=232)

Note: The relation between political leaning and perception of endangering Israel as a Jewish State is statistically significant at both points of time.

We can see from the data in Tables 4 - 6 that all the political groups that are strongly disliked, from the Left as well as from the Right, are perceived as endangering the strength of the country. Nevertheless, it seems that the basis for this dislike derives from different sources. With regard to the Left it arises more from the threat to the Jewish character of the country and to its security, while the basis for disliking Right groups is the threat to democracy and to the security of the country.

Tolerance Towards "Post-Zionist" & "Fundamentalist" Groups

Following the findings concerning the perception of disliked groups from the Right and the Left as endangering democracy in Israel and the Jewish character of the country, we shall examine tolerance towards specific groups that threaten these values. We focused on groups which want to abolish the Jewish character of the State of Israel - we call them "Post-Zionist" groups; and those who would like to turn the State of Israel into a Halachic State, one that is run according to the rules of the Jewish religion and not according to democratic principles - we call them "Fundamentalist" groups. This examination enables us to determine whether Israeli society is more sensitive to the Jewish-Zionist character of the state, threatened by the "Post-Zionist" groups, or to the democratic principles threatened by the "Fundamentalist" groups.

The tolerance towards Post-Zionist groups was measured by the following question :

> "*Among Israeli Jews, there are some who think that the Jewish character of the State of Israel should be abolished, e.g. the words of the national anthem should be changed, the flag should be changed, the Law of Return should be revoked. How should these people be treated?*
> 1. *They should be allowed to express their ideas without hindrance.*
> 2. *They should not be allowed to express their ideas, e.g. the media should disregard them.*
> 3. *All means available should be used against them, e.g. security agencies should keep them under close surveillance, they should be detained without trial by administrative orders".*

Tolerance of Fundamentalist groups was measured by the following question ;

> "*Among Israeli Jews there are some who think that Israel should be a Halachic State, where life would be conducted in accordance with the rules of the Jewish religion and not according to democratic principles. How should those people be treated?*
> 1. *They should be allowed to express their ideas without hindrance.*
> 2. *They should not be allowed to express their ideas, e.g. the media should disregard them.*
> 3. *All means should be used against them, e.g. security agencies should keep them under close surveillance, they should be detained without trial by administrative orders".*

Table 7 shows that there has been a slight rise in tolerance both towards the Post-Zionist and towards the Fundamentalist groups between November 1996 and December 1997. In both surveys, November 1996 and December 1997, there is a higher level of tolerance towards the Fundamentalist groups who want to turn Israel into a Halachic State compared with the level of tolerance expressed towards the Post-Zionist groups that want to change the Jewish character of the country.

Table 7.
Tolerance Towards Post-Zionist Groups and Fundamentalist Groups, November 1996, December 1997 (percentage).

Not allow to express their ideas*

Allow to express their ideas
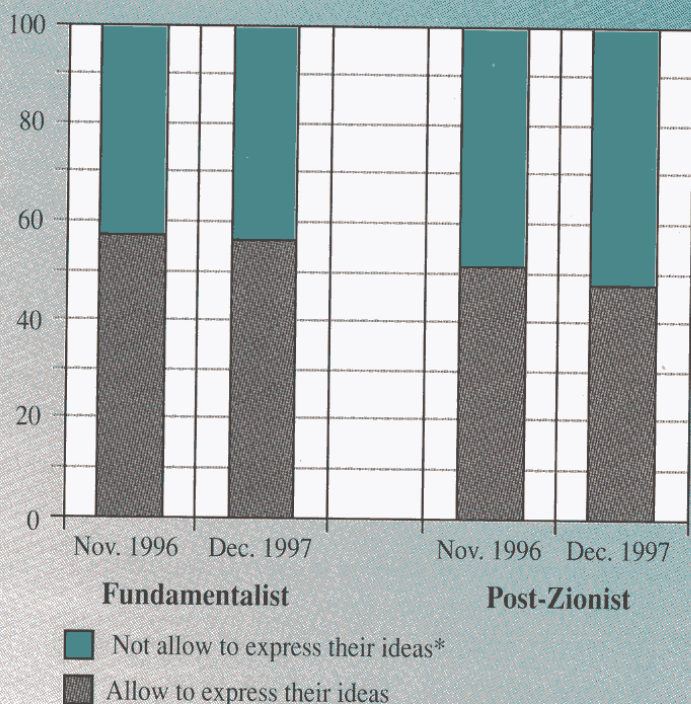
* Includes answer categories 2+3

It seems then that the Jewish population in Israel tends to be more tolerant towards people who want to change the Secular-Democratic character of the state. The lower tolerance towards those who want to change the Zionist character of the state is an indication that the value of a Jewish state is more important to the Jewish population than democratic values that are under threat from those who want Israel to be a Halachic state.

Tolerance towards Post-Zionist and Fundamentalist groups among different social groups

As we mentioned in the first part of this report, we did not find any significant differences in tolerance towards disliked political groups according to the degree of religiousness or political leaning. This is not the case when it comes to Post-Zionist and Fundamentalist groups.

The data in Table 8 concerning the level of tolerance towards Post-Zionist groups show that between November 1996 and December 1997 there was a decrease in the level of tolerance towards these groups among those who define themselves as ultra orthodox and orthodox, and a rise in the level of tolerance among those defining themselves as observant and secular. The outstanding change (a decrease of 15%) took place among those defining themselves as ultra orthodox.

Table 8.
Joint Distribution Between Tolerance towards Post-Zionist and Fundamentalist Groups and Degree of Religiousness, November 1996, December 1997 (percentage).

	Degree of Religiousness							
	Ultra Orthodox		Orthodox		Observant		Secular	
	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997
Post-Zionist groups should be allowed to express their ideas								
	51.1	36.0	39.3	34.1	34.2	41.8	55.6	63.7
Fundamentalist groups should be allowed to express their ideas								
	86.5	91.3	65.2	69.6	49.2	56.3	52.2	53.2

Notes:
1. The relation between degree of religiousness and tolerance is statistically significant at both points of time.
2. In November 1996 the respondents were distributed as following: 26 ultra orthodox, 55 orthodox, 213 observant, 308 secular. In December 1997 the distribution was as follows: 25 ultra orthodox, 44 orthodox, 189 observant, 250 secular.

The level of tolerance towards Fundamentalist groups has risen between November 1996 and December 1997 within all groups. For most of those who defined themselves as ultra orthodox this is not a measurement of tolerance as most of them support or believe in these ideas. Those who define themselves as secular show the lowest level of tolerance towards the Fundamentalist groups, but even so, more than 50% of them express tolerant attitudes.

The level of tolerance to both Post-Zionist and Fundamentalist groups rose between November 1996 and December 1997 regardless of political leaning. The highest level of tolerance towards Post-Zionist groups is expressed among those who lean to the Left, and the lowest is among those who lean to the Right. Although there is a rise in the level of tolerance in all groups, the gap between Right and Left in level of tolerance towards Post-Zionist groups has grown between November 1996 and December 1997 from about 22% to about 28%.

Table 9.
Joint Distribution Between Tolerance Towards Post-Zionist and Fundamentalist Groups and Political Leaning, November 1996, December 1997 (percentage).

	Political Leaning					
Tolerance	Right		Center		Left	
	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997	Nov. 1996	Dec. 1997
Post-Zionist groups should be allowed to express their ideas						
	36.8	40.4	45.6	49.5	58.8	68.7
Fundamentalist groups should be allowed to express their ideas						
	56.1	59.0	53.3	59.0	52.4	53.4

Notes:
1. The relation between political leaning and tolerance towards Post-Zionist groups is statistically significant at both points of time. The relation between political leaning and tolerance towards Fundamentalist groups is not significant in December 1997.
2. In November 1996 the distribution of respondents was as follows: 231 leaning to the Right, 149 leaning to the Center, 205 leaning to the Left. In December 1997 the distribution of the respondents was as follows: 165 leaning to the Right, 281 leaning to the Center, 129 leaning to the Left.

Table 9 shows an asymmetry in the level of tolerance between the Right and the Left. The level of tolerance in the Left towards the Fundamentalist groups, who represent values that threaten them, is close to the level of tolerance of the Right. On the other hand, the level of tolerance of the Right towards Post-Zionist groups, who represent values that threaten them, is much lower than the level of tolerance of the Left. It is important to note, in addition, that although the level of tolerance towards these groups has risen a little between 1996 and 1997, the pattern that we see is more polarized between the Right and the Left and between religious and secular people in their attitude to these groups (see Table 8).

Summary

Tolerance in society is the product of many factors. The political culture has an effect on the levels of tolerance and intolerance, but the social cleavages, the polarization in the attitudes of different social groups and additional events all have their impact. The effect of all these can be seen in the change that has occurred in the composition of the disliked political groups. Just before the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, respondents indicated more Right-wing groups as strongly disliked. Today there is more of a balance between groups from the Right and the Left. The average score of tolerance towards disliked political groups in December 1997 is above 50 and is the same for people leaning to the Right or the Left. In other words, the tendency to choose groups from the Right or the Left as disliked groups is similar, and the level of tolerance expressed towards these groups among people of different political leanings and different degrees of religiousness is similar.

The perception of living under threat is at a high level in Israeli society and this has important implications, as people with a high level of such feelings tend to express less tolerant attitudes. The disliked groups both on the Right and on the Left are conceived as endangering the security, the strength and the stability of the state. In this context it is evident from our surveys that Right-wing groups are perceived as more threatening to democracy while the left-wing groups are perceived as threatening to the Jewish character of the country.

The level of tolerance towards groups with extreme ideologies, such as Post-Zionist or Fundamentalist groups, is somewhat higher in 1997 than in 1996. These findings indicate a certain rise in the level of tolerance. Even so, a more focused examination identifies a growing polarization in Jewish Israeli society between religious and secular people, and to a lesser degree between the Right and the Left, in the patterns of tolerance towards these groups. This polarization can be seen in the willingness of respondents to express a lower level of tolerance towards groups that hold views less acceptable to them.